

TAB

Federal Records Management Since the Hoover Commission Report

By HERBERT E. ANGEL

*Records Management Division
National Archives and Records Service*

EVEN the archival profession, which takes the long view down the centuries, is occasionally amazed to find that the individual years are jet propelled. Four years have already passed since the Hoover Commission Task Force submitted its report on a records management program for the Federal Government.¹ The National Archives, redesignated as the National Archives and Records Service, has been a part of the General Services Administration rather than an independent agency for 3½ years. The records management program recommended by the Task Force report was initiated at the headquarters level in the National Archives and Records Service 3 years ago and has been expanded steadily into the rest of the country during the past 2½ years. Now seems an appropriate time to summarize for members of the profession the progress made to date in carrying out the recommendations of the Task Force.

The Hoover Commission, following the advice of its Task Force on Records Management, made three general recommendations in its report. These were:

1. That a Records Management Bureau be established in the office of General Services, incorporating the existing National Archives establishment and having the additional responsibilities of establishing and operating Federal records centers and developing and promoting Government-wide improvements and economies in records management.
2. That a Federal Records Act be enacted to provide for the more effective creation, preservation, management, and disposal of records of the United States Government.
3. That an adequate program for records management be required in each department and agency of the United States Government, including controls on record making, record keeping, and selective records preservation.

¹ Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, *Records Management in the United States Government; A Report with Recommendations* (Washington, 1949). See also a review of this report by Martin P. Claussen in *American Archivist*, 12:286-290 (July 1949).

Four years later, all of these recommendations have either been accomplished or are in the process of being carried out.

LEGISLATION

The second of these recommendations, that a Federal Records Act be enacted, may be considered as fully accomplished through the passage of two statutes. The first of these was the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 (Public Law 152, 81st Congress), approved by the President on June 30, 1949. This act established the General Services Administration and authorized the Administrator of General Services to make surveys of Government records and of records management and disposal practices and to promote, in cooperation with executive agencies, improved records management practices and controls, including the central storage or disposition of records not needed for current use. It transferred to this Administration the National Archives Establishment and related bodies — the National Archives Council, the National Historical Publications Commission, the National Archives Trust Fund Board, the Administrative Committee of the Federal Register, and the Board of Trustees of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

On September 5, 1950, the President approved a second statute, the Federal Records Act of 1950 (Public Law 754, 81st Congress), which enlarged upon and superseded the National Archives Act of 1934. With respect to records management, the new act spelled out in detail the general authority granted the Administrator of General Services by Public Law 152 and also imposed on operating agencies certain responsibilities in the field of records management. The law likewise defined records management for the first time in any Federal statute, using the broad terms recommended in the Task Force report, which covered not only records retirement but records creation and maintenance as well.

Thus the new act charged the Administrator with responsibility for improving standards, procedures, and techniques with respect to the creation of records; the organization, maintenance, and use of current records; and the disposition of records when no longer needed for current operations. He was also specifically authorized to establish and operate records centers. Although this act, like most recent legislation, assigned all duties and responsibilities to the head of the agency, it assumed, of course, that he would in turn delegate them to his best qualified assistants. This the Administrator did in September 1950, delegating to the Archivist of the

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

15

United States all the archives and records functions assigned to the Administrator by Public Laws 152 and 754 and the records disposal act of 1943.

The new act also directed the heads of agencies to make and preserve adequate records of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and essential transactions of their agencies, such as those needed to protect the legal and financial rights of the Government and of persons directly affected by the activities of the agencies. They were also directed to establish and maintain effective records management programs to ensure proper control of the creation of records, efficient management of current records, and the prompt and orderly retirement of records no longer needed.

CENTRAL AGENCY

As for the first recommendation of the Hoover Commission, that central machinery be provided to plan and conduct a Government-wide records management program, this too has been carried out. A Records Management Division to serve as a focal point for this program was formally established within the National Archives and Records Service in December 1949 and was activated a month later. In September 1950 a Records Management Service was established in each of the 10 General Services Administration regions to spread the program to Government agencies outside Washington. These organizational elements have been staffed gradually as Congress has appropriated the funds, and, although not all of them are yet in full operation, they are functioning along the lines recommended by the Hoover Commission.

The central records management organization thus provided has proceeded with the development and promotion of Government-wide improvements and economies in records management. One of the first steps in this direction has been to provide standards in the form of regulations supplementing the Federal Records Act of 1950. Issued as Title 3 of the *Regulations of the General Services Administration*, these regulations were drafted with the advice of the Federal Records Council established under authority of the Federal Records Act. Although they contain a few general provisions, the regulations are chiefly concerned with the disposition of Federal records. They include sections on agency records management programs, records control schedules, general retention and disposal schedules, reproduction of permanently valuable records, agency records disposal authority, emergency authorization for the disposal of records, methods of records disposal, transfer of records

THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

from one executive agency to another, transfer of records to Federal records centers, transfer of records to the National Archives, and agency records centers.

Many sections of the regulations restate and supersede similar regulations issued by the National Archives Council during the period when the National Archives was an independent agency. A few requirements, however, are entirely new. One of these defines in greater detail than does the Federal Records Act the various elements to be included in agency programs for the creation of records. It also requires agencies to designate liaison offices to deal with the National Archives and Records Service and prescribes the submission of annual statistical summaries of their records holdings.

Several new provisions are made with respect to records scheduling. Federal agencies in existence on June 30, 1951, are directed to compile not later than June 30, 1954, records control schedules for all major groups of records in their custody having importance in terms of content, bulk, or space and equipment occupied. For agencies created after June 30, 1951, such schedules are required within 1 year after the creation of the agency. No significant changes are made in the standards to be followed by agencies in making photographic or other reproductions of permanently valuable records in order to dispose of the originals, but preclearance of projects of this nature with the National Archives and Records Service is now required. This step has been taken in order to avoid the possibility of approval being withheld after a project is completed because an agency has failed to comply with the standards. Finally, the law regarding records disposal is clarified by making it plain that agencies may, in cases of emergency or in the interests of economy, retain records authorized for disposal beyond the date specified for their disposal.

The new regulations prescribe the procedures for transferring agency records to Federal records centers, about which more will be said later. They also lay down the policy that permanently valuable records will normally be transferred to the National Archives by way of a Federal records center or an approved agency records center. Records of special types or value, however, are authorized for direct transfer to the National Archives. The regulations provisionally approve existing agency records centers pending their inspection by the General Services Administration and provide procedures for obtaining approval for the establishment or relocation of agency centers. They also require an annual statistical report on the operations of each such center.

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

17

The next step in providing records management standards will be the issuance of a series of instructional pamphlets designed to amplify the regulations still further and furnish the necessary technical guidance for carrying them out. Several of these pamphlets have been completed in draft form, including some in the areas of records creation and records organization, maintenance, and use, and a number of them will be issued during the coming year.² Whenever these pamphlets deal with an area not already covered in the regulations, the necessary regulatory material will be issued simultaneously with the pamphlets.

Another kind of standard is supplied through general records control schedules, each of which covers some type of record found in more than one agency or, more often, throughout the entire Government. These schedules, which are extensions of the general schedules initiated by the National Archives in 1946, contain appropriate instructions for the retirement of records of enduring value, as well as for the disposal of records of relatively short-term value. They also include suggestions for filing the records so as to facilitate their use and disposition and discuss the nature and value of each item listed in the schedule.³

Fourteen general schedules have now been issued, providing retention and disposal standards for perhaps a tenth of all Federal records. These schedules cover such common types of records as those dealing with civilian personnel; pay rolls and pay administration; procurement and supply; disposal of property; budget preparation, presentation, and apportionment; accountable officers' accounts; expenditure accounting; stores, plant, and cost accounting; travel and transportation; motor vehicle maintenance and operation; space and building maintenance; communications (messenger, wire, wireless, and mail); printing, binding, duplication, and distribution; and informational services. Other general schedules will be completed as rapidly as possible. Present plans are for all such schedules to be published as chapters in a volume that will be given Government-wide distribution.

FEDERAL RECORDS CENTERS

Besides recommending that the new Federal agency discharge the staff responsibility of developing and promoting Government-wide

² One of the first pamphlets to be issued will be a revision of a recent article in this journal: Terry Beach, "Subject File Manuals: the Why and How of Their Development," *American Archivist*, 15: 105-126 (Apr. 1952).

³ For a more complete discussion of these schedules, see Isadore Perlman, "General Schedules and Federal Records," *American Archivist*, 15: 27-38 (Jan. 1952).

improvements and economies in records management, the Hoover Commission urged that the agency operate Federal records centers to serve all Government agencies. The performance of this operating assignment has gone forward simultaneously with that of the staff job, but, as had been expected, its progress has been more rapid.

The General Services Administration now operates, as part of its Records Management Service, Federal records centers in 8 of its 10 regions. Located in Boston, New York, Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, Fort Worth, Denver, and San Francisco, these centers are responsible for the economical storage, processing, and servicing of Federal records that do not need to be retained in more expensive agency space but that are not yet ready for either transfer to the National Archives or disposal. These general-purpose centers are supplemented by a specialized Federal records center in St. Louis for the personnel records of all separated Federal employees; by General Services Administration records depositories in Kansas City and Seattle for records of the General Services Administration, records of disestablished Federal agencies, and other records transferred in accordance with agency-wide agreements; and small annexes or staging areas in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Portland, Oregon, for records that can be maintained more economically in those cities than in the regional Federal records centers because of the short time the records are to be retained, the reference activity of the records, or the shipping charges. The GSA records depositories will be expanded into Federal records centers when funds are available, probably sometime after July 1, 1953.

The centers and depositories did not spring into being fully equipped. Their number and size have been governed by congressional appropriations, which fortunately have increased from year to year, despite the limitation on funds for civilian functions because of the Korean situation and other factors. At their present rate of expansion, the centers should reach a leveling-off point about June 30, 1954.

The growth of the centers has also been limited by two physical factors, space and equipment. Suitable warehouse-type space in large blocks at reasonable cost has been scarce. Almost no Government-owned space of this character has been available, especially as defense plants in the industrial reserve, the use of which the Hoover Commission recommended, have been reactivated. Many of the centers are consequently in low-cost rented buildings which, though they are the most suitable to be had, can hardly be considered as

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

19

permanent quarters. The recurrent steel shortages have also retarded the installation of the shelving, on which the records are stored in cardboard cartons, and even though wood shelving has been used at several locations, the capacity of the shelving in the centers is still slightly less than the volume of records on hand.

Despite the limitations on money, buildings, and shelving, the centers and depositories in the 2-year period ending June 30, 1952, received nearly 1.4 million cubic feet of records from Federal agencies. At the present rate of accessioning, this figure will reach 2 million by July 1, 1953, and 2.6 million cubic feet a year later. By receiving these records, the centers as of June 30, 1952, had removed records from 485,000 square feet of office space and 917,000 square feet of storage space, the greater part of which was in blocks of 100 or more square feet and is therefore considered reassignable for other purposes. This space helped the Public Buildings Service, another component of the General Services Administration, to meet the almost impossible demands made upon it as a result of the defense effort. By storing the records received in cardboard containers on steel or wood shelving, the centers in the same period emptied 55,000 usable filing cabinets and 78,000 usable transfer cases. Over and above this immediately usable equipment, 4,700 file cabinets and 5,600 transfer cases worth repairing have also been emptied. The release of all these cabinets aided the Federal Supply Service, another part of the General Services Administration, in furnishing filing equipment for rapidly expanding defense agencies. Another 8,800 usable cabinets and 37,100 usable transfer cases were still on hand on July 1, 1952, and are scheduled for release as quickly as shelving can be obtained.

Important as it may be, especially in terms of space and filing equipment, for the centers and depositories to receive records, they have other significant responsibilities. They must screen the records received for eventual disposal, and meanwhile they must provide any reference service that may be necessary. By June 30, 1952, nearly 100,000 cubic feet of records had been disposed of after screening. On that date all the centers and depositories combined held a total of 1,293,000 cubic feet of Federal records. The largest quantities of these records were in the centers in Washington (477,000 cubic feet); St. Louis (267,000 cubic feet); New York, including Philadelphia (189,000 cubic feet); San Francisco, including Los Angeles (104,000 cubic feet); and Chicago (91,000 cubic feet).

Leaving out of account the personnel records received in St.

Louis, where nearly every Government agency is represented, records of 121 different agencies or major Government units have now been received at centers. Among the agencies represented by the largest quantities of records, again ignoring the personnel records in St. Louis, are the War Assets Administration (112,000 cubic feet), the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (97,000 cubic feet), the United States Maritime Commission (78,000 cubic feet), the War Production Board (60,000 cubic feet), the Bureau of Internal Revenue (51,000 cubic feet), the Bureau of the Census (41,000 cubic feet), the Immigration and Naturalization Service (41,000 cubic feet), the Federal Supply Service (40,000 cubic feet), the General Accounting Office (39,000 cubic feet), the War Shipping Administration (36,000 cubic feet), the Production and Marketing Administration (30,000 cubic feet), and the United States Coast Guard (30,000 cubic feet).

Though these records are noncurrent, they are far from inactive or dead. Excluding the personnel records in St. Louis, the annual reference rate on the records in all the centers and depositories is now 334,000.

The establishment of a specialized Federal records center at St. Louis for agency records of separated Federal employees is particularly significant. The center began its operations at the end of October 1951 with the receipt of 131,289 cubic feet of such records from the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force. Within a few weeks 60,101 cubic feet of personnel records were received from the Department of the Navy. From then until June 30, 1952, the St. Louis center accepted records of separated personnel amounting to 76,430 cubic feet from most of the other agencies of the Federal Government, either directly from the agencies themselves or from the National Archives or other Federal records centers to which they had previously been transferred. On June 30, 1952, after disposing of a few hundred cubic feet of records without further value, the center held 267,337 cubic feet of records.

The heart of this collection consists of some 19 million official personnel folders, supplemented by other personnel records on microfilm and substantial quantities of pay-roll and related fiscal records. Though these records are not considered to be permanent, few have ever been destroyed, and it seems certain that they must be retained for a long period of years. Centralizing the records and putting them in good order was therefore deemed desirable. The original transfers from the Army and Air Force, the Navy, and a

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

21

few other agencies were large, well-alphabetized blocks of folders previously maintained in centralized collections. Folders received from some individual agencies, however, had been maintained in as many as 80 separate collections throughout the country, and these had to be brought together to speed reference service. Each agency sending records to the center also added material to be interfiled as it transferred periodically to the center the records of recently separated employees, usually a year after the date of separation.

Assimilating all this material was a tremendous task; by June 30, 1952, however, 456,000 folders had been interfiled among the 14,444,000 folders previously received, and 2,700,000 other folders had been grouped alphabetically so as to be serviceable. Another 1,400,000 folders were in the process of being interfiled but were so arranged as to be fully usable at all times. It is expected that all folders now on hand, as well as all others to be received during the year, will be completely grouped or interfiled by June 30, 1953, by which time the St. Louis center should contain all the agency records of separated Federal employees.

The centralization of so many Government personnel records from many locations into one has greatly simplified the problem of persons wanting information from the records. It has also imposed a heavy reference load on the St. Louis center. Over 337,000 reference requests were handled in the 8 months from October 1951 through June 1952. These requests, plus the addition of 456,000 folders to the files during the same period, represented 4,600 services a day on the records — an annual rate of 1,190,000. This workload will undoubtedly increase, but as it does it will reduce correspondingly the burden on personnel offices throughout the Federal Government.

To facilitate reference service in the future by reducing the number of groups of records to be consulted, all personnel records currently received in St. Louis for employees separated on or after January 1, 1952, are being filed in a single alphabet without regard to agency. With the passage of time most of the reference service will shift from the older records, now in many separate files, to the more recent records in a single file, with a corresponding improvement in the speed, accuracy, and ease of service.

How do these accomplishments compare with the program projected by the Hoover Commission? The Task Force report assumed that its recommendations would constitute a comprehensive long-range program that would be adequately financed and carried out in a normal governmental situation. Such, of course, has not

been the case. The limitations on funds, buildings, and equipment have already been mentioned. The Department of Defense and certain other agencies have retained their records centers instead of consolidating them as anticipated in the report, although 104 agency records centers have been reduced to 75 in the last 2 years. Emergency projects for releasing space and filing equipment have been given priority over normal operations. On the other hand, shortages of space and filing equipment have brought about greater cooperation on the part of civilian agencies than would normally have been expected. The net result is that progress has been amazingly close to forecast. The Task Force report indicated that Federal records centers would receive 2 million cubic feet of records in the first 2 years, saving space, equipment, and other expense to the amount of \$7,660,000. By contrast, the Federal records centers at the end of 2 calendar years — which were partial years of operation, that combined were barely equivalent to one full year of operation — had received about 1.4 million cubic feet of records and had released space and filing equipment worth \$5,421,000.

AGENCY PROGRAMS

Establishment of an adequate records management program in each Government department and agency, the third recommendation of the Hoover Commission, is required by the Federal Records Act of 1950. As recommended by the Task Force report, such agency programs are required to include controls on record making, record keeping, and selective records preservation. More detailed requirements in each of these areas are being prepared for issuance in the form of regulations of the Administrator of General Services.

The need for adequate agency programs is pointed up by a few statistics. At the time of the Hoover Commission report, the volume of Federal records was estimated at 18.5 million cubic feet. As reported by the agencies themselves, this quantity increased to 20.5 million cubic feet in 1949, 22.1 million in 1950, 24.1 million in 1951, and 24.8 million in 1952. The same reports show that Federal records, presumably because of the international situation, were being created at the rate of 2.6 million cubic feet in 1950, 3.5 million in 1951, and 3.9 million in 1952.

Two safety valves prevented the records situation from getting completely out of control. Thanks to the application of an increasing number of general records schedules and agency records schedules, the rate of records disposal increased from 1 million cubic feet in 1950, to 2.1 million in 1951, to 2.6 million in 1952. And the

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

23

holdings of Federal records centers increased from zero in 1950, to 0.6 million cubic feet in 1951, to 1.3 million in 1952. Consequently the quantity of Federal records actually in agency space, which had climbed from 21.2 million cubic feet in 1950 to 22.6 million in 1951, held steady at 22.6 million in 1952.

In view of this situation and also of the fact that the agencies reported in 1951 that 44 percent of their records were still not controlled by schedules, the General Services Administration determined that it could best assist most agencies in establishing adequate programs by helping to decrease the quantity of Federal records to the lowest level consistent with efficient operations. To accomplish this objective, survey and assistance projects are currently being carried on in both the executive and the judicial branches of the Government. In these surveys, analysts from the agency involved and from the General Services Administration review existing records control schedules applicable to the agency's records. Whenever necessary, these schedules are revised or supplemented with new schedules to assure adequate coverage. The effectiveness of the schedules and the extent to which they are being carried out is also checked. Finally, the agency is assisted in clearing out unneeded records by disposing immediately of any already authorized for disposal and by transferring to Federal Records Centers any records not currently needed by the agency but not yet disposable. These surveys include not only records in the central office or headquarters of the agency but also records in field offices selected because of their size, special problems, or representative character.

Such survey projects, plus considerable effort on the part of the agencies themselves, have been so effective that only 13 percent of Federal records — 2.8 million cubic feet — remained unscheduled on June 30, 1952. It seems entirely probable, therefore, that the June 1954 deadline for scheduling all major groups of records will be met. Moreover, the agencies are already exceeding the annual disposal rate of 2.5 million cubic feet estimated by the Hoover Commission, though not all by any means through the efforts of the General Services Administration, and the tempo of records disposal should increase in 1953 and 1954 as the current scheduling program is completed.

In a few cases, usually at the request of the agency involved, the surveys have been broadened to include, in addition to records disposal, a review of the agency's practices with respect to records creation and records organization, maintenance, and use. Some surveys, on a somewhat smaller scale, have been made at their re-

THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

quest in local offices of a number of agencies by specialists from the Records Management Service in the General Services Administration regional offices. These surveys not only have brought about the improvement of records management practices in the agencies being surveyed, but also have been beneficial to the General Services Administration, in that they determine the effectiveness of its regulations and provide information about successful records management practices that may be of use to other agencies or of use in developing records management standards.

Another large block of agencies, the defense agencies created since the beginning of the Korean crisis, have been assisted in the establishment of full-scale records management programs as a means of expediting current defense activities and avoiding future inefficiencies and waste with respect to records. Other agencies have also been given assistance to the extent that the staff permitted. The records management specialists, working with personnel of the agencies concerned, have established new records management programs and prepared procedures and instructions for existing programs. In the area of records creation, they have developed correspondence manuals and similar guides and developed or revised systems for issuing directives and orders. They have been still more active in the area of records organization, maintenance, and use, where they have developed or revised systems for handling mail and communications, developed classification and filing manuals, installed or revised filing systems, and trained records personnel.

A summary of the technical assistance provided on current records problems to defense and other agencies of both the executive and legislative branches during the past two years is given in the following table.

NUMBER OF AGENCIES SERVED, FISCAL YEARS 1951 AND 1952

Type of Service	Defense Agencies		Other Agencies	
	1951	1952	1951	1952
Establishment of records management programs	5	1	—	1
Preparation of procedures and instructions	6	2	2	4
Analysis of special records problems	2	1	2	3
Development of correspondence manuals and similar guides	3	2	—	1
Development or revision of system for issuing directives	2	2	1	1

FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT 25

Development or revision of system for handling mail and communications	6	2	3	2
Development of classification and filing manuals	2	4	3	7
Installation or revision of filing system	1	3	3	5
Training of records personnel	1	3	3	4
 Totals	 28	 20	 17	 28

Most of the technical assistance described above has been furnished by the central office staff of the National Archives and Records Service, with occasional aid from the staffs in regional offices. The regional office staffs are frequently called upon by local agencies for technical advice, however, and in addition have been instrumental in helping field offices in their regions to dispose outright of nearly 11,000 cubic feet of records — the equivalent of the contents of over 1,500 filing cabinets.

Since November 1951 the regional Records Management Service staffs, in collaboration with their colleagues in the regional Federal Supply Service, have also carefully reviewed agency requests for filing equipment to ensure that good records management practices are being followed and that existing equipment is being effectively utilized. This review, coupled with improved utilization practices in the agencies, has greatly reduced the purchases of filing equipment. Procurement, which had amounted to 69,000 file cabinets in the fiscal year 1949, 65,000 in 1950, and 97,000 in 1951, dropped off to 32,000 in 1952, a reduction of 67 percent in 1 year.

One technical assistance project affecting all Government agencies merits special mention. This is the project, begun during 1951, for assuring the availability of those records of the Federal Government essential for its operation in an emergency. Discussions of their problems and progress on this project were held with many agencies, and in addition to consideration of the specific problems of individual agencies, standards for the protection of personnel and fiscal records common to all agencies were developed with the assistance of representatives of the Bureau of the Budget, the Civil Service Commission, and the General Accounting Office. Funds amounting to \$364,000 were appropriated by Congress to the General Services Administration in 1951 for the purpose of assuring the protection of vital records held by agencies without sufficient resources of their own to complete their programs. The Census Bureau, the Patent Office, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress were all given sub-

stantial aid from these funds. Almost every agency of the Government has now sent duplicate copies of its vital records to dispersed areas; and in cases where an agency had no appropriate field stations of its own, Federal Records Centers have provided secure storage for the records.

It is still too early to assess the full effects of the Hoover Commission report on records management in the Federal Government. The program recommended by the Commission is not yet in full operation, and all the facts cannot yet be in. When the Commission report was being so vigorously debated in 1949,⁴ the present writer urged that judgment be reserved for 10 years. As of today, however, there seems little reason to doubt the realization of one fundamental benefit anticipated by the Task Force report, namely, "the certain knowledge that (a) record-making and record-keeping in the Federal Government will rapidly become more efficient management tools; (b) the essential records of the Government's obligations at home and abroad are safeguarded; (c) the invaluable store of experience recorded in the permanent records of our national effort to sustain democratic capitalism is accessible and can better be utilized."

⁴ Interagency Records Administration Conference, *The Report of the Hoover Commission on Records Management* (Washington, 1949).